# Confession, Vacillation, and Transformation: A Study of Aesthetic Influence of Synge on James Joyce

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## Introduction

It is well known that the world premiere of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 had an unsuccessful run, neither because the script had a fatal flaw nor the acting was unconvincing, but because the performance was *too effective* to be appreciatively accepted. The candid use of the word 'shift', a woman's undergarment, disturbed the audience so grievously that they 'broke up in disorder' (White-Jeffares 239), leading to the suspension of the performance. A fierce controversy arose over the play's aesthetic value, and W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, the prime movers of the Abbey Theatre, supported the play. However, it is less known, that James Joyce was also observing the development of events closely through newspapers in Paris, far away from Dublin. He was so greatly concerned that he was distracted from his writing of 'The Dead', the last short story in his collection entitled *Dubliners*. In all likelihood, Joyce was envious of the enormous impact Synge had on the Irish audience: 'Synge is a storm centre: but I have done nothing' (Joyce, *Letter II* 215). Thereafter, Joyce seemed to develop a deep devotion to Synge, although he never stated this positively. This paper presents an interdisciplinary comparison of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Joyce's writings, in addition to exploring the extent to which Joyce was influenced by the creative writings of Synge with regard to the concepts of confession, vacillation and transformation.

## 1. Synge's reference to Joyce

Although Synge repeatedly met and talked with Joyce in Paris, his references to Joyce in correspondence with others are relatively sparse. Synge visited Paris on 6th March 1903 to close his flat and left for Dublin on the 13th of the same month. Joyce had been staying at Hôtel Corneille near Théâtre de l'Odéon. According to Herbert Gorman, Synge met Joyce 'seven or eight times' within that relatively short period of time (Gorman 101). He had many 'quarrelsome

discussions' with Joyce concerning 'language, style, poetry, the drama and literature in general' (Stanislaus 214). Despite these bitter disputes, however, Synge allowed Joyce to read a manuscript of his tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*, which Joyce would criticize for its lack of action as a tragedy.

On the 10th or 11th March, Synge wrote a brief message to Joyce: 'You will say so as it is all the same to me' (Synge, *Letters I* 68). The note clearly reflected the nature of their meetings, and it might confirm several claims by Stanislaus that Synge and Joyce were 'antitheses' of each other 'in all matters of opinion and in manner of life' (Stanislaus 214). Upon his return to Dublin from Paris via London, Synge started to revise the play, which was to be produced by the Fay brothers' Irish National Theatre Society the following year. About two weeks after Synge left Paris, he wrote a letter to Lady Gregory, in which he disclosed some of his impressions of Joyce:

> [T]hough I have not much news to give about Joyce I believe I promised to tell you what I saw of him. He seems to be pretty badly off, and is wandering about Paris rather unbrushed and rather indolent, spending his studious moments in the National Library reading Ben Jonson. French literature I understand is beneath him! Still he interested me a good deal and as he is being gradually won over by the charm of French life his time in Paris is not wasted. He talks of coming back to Dublin in the summer to live there on journalism while he does his serious work at his leisure. I cannot think that he will ever be a poet of importance, but his intellect is extraordinarily keen and if he keeps fairly sane he ought to do excellent essay-writing. (Synge, *Letters I* 68)

Of all the letters and manuscripts known in existence so far, this is the last substantial description of Joyce that Synge wrote. Because of his premature death in 1909 at the age of thirty-seven, Synge could not have foreseen that Joyce would be acclaimed as a master of literary modernism. Although Joyce completed 'The Dead', the final entry in *Dubliners*, the collection of short stories would not be available until 1914, when it was published by Grant Richards Ltd. All of his major works—*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Exiles* (1919), *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939)—were published after 1914, and Synge could not have accessed them. At that time, Joyce was actually quite obscure.

Synge nevertheless appears to have formed a relatively accurate judgment of Joyce's uncommon intelligence and literary talent, despite the almost palpable sense of cool detach-

ment in the text. Although their repeated meetings and discussions might have exerted a subtle influence on Synge's revision of *Riders to the Sea* later that year, Joyce's literary works did not affect Synge's creative writing in general.

## 2. Joyce's references to Synge

In contrast to Synge's apparent psychological detachment, the impact of their meetings lingered in Joyce's mind for some time. On the day when Joyce met Synge in Paris (9th March 1903), Joyce wrote to his brother, Stanislaus, telling him rather conceitedly that Synge likened Joyce's mind to that of 'Spinosa [sic]' (Joyce, *Letters II* 35); furthermore, he proudly wrote that he had expressed incisive criticism on the play, underscoring that, ever since he had read the manuscript of *Riders to the Sea*, he had 'been riddling it mentally' until it no longer possessed any 'sound spot' (Joyce, *Letters II* 35). Far from being reserved in his meeting with Synge, Joyce hurt his feelings and burst into 'kinks of laughter' (Stanislaus 214) that made Synge even angrier.

A week after Synge left for Dublin, Joyce wrote a similar letter to his mother—still proud, but with milder expressions—to let her know that he had read and 'criticized' Synge's play and that he was told that he had 'a mind like Spinoza' (Joyce, *Letters II* 38). Despite his superiority complex, Joyce appreciated Synge's exceptional talent for creative writing and was impressed by the fact that Synge had already written four plays. He wrote, 'Synge will be boomed now by the Irish Theatre' (Joyce, *Letters II* 35). Perhaps Joyce's impertinent, even arrogant attitude was merely a mask, behind which the still unknown writer could hide his feelings of defeat and frustration in front of a budding playwright.

The budding playwright, Synge, would soon flourish. In October 1903, the Irish National Theatre Society produced Synge's one-act play *In the Shadow of the Glen* at Molesworth Hall in Dublin. The play was elaborately written and 'showed little sign of the "prentice hand"' (137). Its stage production, however, 'provoked a hurricane of abuse' (Fay 140), which would ultimately become a prelude to the fierce dispute over his later plays. In February 1904, *Riders to the Sea* was premiered in the same theatre, which, according to W. G. Fay, 'never fails to make the audience accept its inevitable-ness' (Fay 153). The Fay brothers' theatre company delivered the first productions of the Abbey Theatre in December 1904, including a reproduction of *In The Shadow Of The Glen*. The company premiered *The Well of the Saints* at the Abbey Theatre in February 1905. The most influential play by Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was staged at the theatre in January 1907, causing a riot and gripping Joyce's mind.

When the word 'shift', which means 'the traditional under-garment of a woman' (Fay 214) was used in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the audience, deeply disturbed with the usage of an indecent word in a public place, was thrown into an uproar, eventually erupting into a riot. The news of the tumult soon reached Joyce in Paris. After reading an article in the *Daily Mail* under the headline of 'Riot in a Dublin Theatre', he sent a summarized report of the event to his brother Stanislaus. In a tone of both amazement and mockery, Joyce quoted Synge's interview and his claim of 'the right as an artist, to choose whatever subject he wished!' (Joyce, *Letters II* 208). On 11th February 1907, about two weeks after the riots, Joyce sent Stanislaus several copies of *Freeman's Journal*, which covered the riots and the subsequent open forum that was held at the Abbey Theatre. He expressed his great interest in the *Playboy* tumult, adding that he had read 'with pleasure and surprise' (Joyce, *Letters II* 211) a bold reading of the play by Daniel T. Sheehan, in which Sheehan regarded to the antagonist, a wandering tramp, as a liberal artist.(1) Joyce was quite envious of the impact Synge had on the public sentiment and in a letter to Stanislaus, dated February 16, he lamented that he had 'done nothing', while Synge had became 'a storm centre' (Joyce, *Letters II* 215).

In all of these letters, Joyce adopted a relatively haughty and self-important tone, probably in an effort to assuage his own sense of inferiority. This might explain why Joyce compared Synge to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a Norwegian writer, poet and playwright. Joyce always expressed much greater esteem for the works of Ibsen than he did for those of Bjørnson. Indeed, Joyce once argued that 'Ibsen has been the greatest influence on the present generation' (Power 35). In a letter to Stanislaus, Joyce wrote, '[i]f Synge really knows and understands the Irish peasant, [⋯] he might make a duodecimo Bjørnson' (Joyce, *Letters II* 212). His boastful implication was that he himself would make an Irish counterpart of Ibsen. Although Joyce respected Synge's literary talent, he held his own work in much higher esteem. It is thus not surprising that he proudly predicted upon the publication of his *Dubliners* that people would 'speak of me and my master Synge' (Joyce, *Letters II* 211). This sense of rivalry remained in Joyce's mind, but Synge stopped referring to Joyce in his letters soon after he returned from Paris. In contrast, even as late as 1916, Joyce wrote, in a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, one of his patrons, that he had met Synge in Paris, read *Riders to the Sea* and after Synge's death, he had 'translated it into Italian' (Joyce, *Letters I* 99) with the help of his friend, Vidacovich.

## 3. Joyce's exploration into the theme of confession

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, the antagonist, Christy, comes upon a remote village

during his flight as a self-accused parricide, and he is welcomed by the villagers as a hero. Later in the play, his father, still vibrantly alive, arrives and chastises his son. This leads most of the villagers to deride and persecute Christy. In the final moment, however, he frees himself from all the oppressions, his own inferiority complex and mental agony. He transforms into an independent and spiritually uplifted young man (thus the title of *Playboy*) and leaves the village. As demonstrated later in this article, the process of liberation from oppression, severe complex and deep agony, along with the transformation from trouble-minded individual into a self-confident and independent man are quite similar to the processes appearing in the characterizations of antagonists in Joyce's *Ulysses*: Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. Before making any interdisciplinary comparison between Synge's play and Joyce's novel, however, we should consider Joyce's fascination with the idea of psychological transformation, in his earlier works, and the failure of such transformations.

I have already argued that Joyce's exploration of the concept of psychological transformation is reflected in his repeated use of the themes of confession and purification (or the failure thereof) [2]. If a confession booth functions as a purification area, a black box into which a sinner steps and out of which a spiritually transformed person emerges, no such transformation happens to the delirious priest-turned-penitent, who is found in a confession box, in 'The Sisters', the first story in *Dubliners*. The idea of the failure in confession and transformation is also echoed in 'An Encounter'. In the story, a student, playing truant with a classmate, comes upon a sexual deviant in a deserted field, where '[t]here was nobody but ourselves' (Joyce, *Dubliners* 16). The empty and isolated field serves as a confession booth, with the boy as a confessor and the maniac as a sinner, whose voice 'seemed to plead with me that I should understand him' (Joyce, *Dubliners* 20). The boy recoils in horror at this outspoken confession of deviant behaviour, however, abandons the sinner in the lonely field, leaving him as he is. In 'A Painful Case', Mrs Emily Sinico serves as a self-appointed confessor for Mr Duffy in the 'dark discreet room' (Joyce, *Dubliners* 107), urging him to bare his soul to her. He fails in this. He is continuously non-interactive, wasting opportunities to achieve any dialectic transformation and remaining intact as a self-centred aesthetic.

Joyce's treatment of sterile interaction in secluded spaces can be read as a bitter criticism of the traditional confessional in his contemporary Ireland although he did not provide the readers with an effective substitute for the religious custom in *Dubliners* or *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*. In 'The Boarding House', the private lodging houses 'a floating population' consisting of 'tourists' and 'artistes' (Joyce, *Dubliners* 56). In practice, the lodging serves as a

bohemian community, complete with a music hall. In this congenial living environment, Mr Doran, one of the young inhabitants, suffers from feelings of guilt for having had sexual relations with the proprietress's daughter. The 'madam' senses her lodger's wrongdoing and demands non-monetary 'reparation' from him (Joyce, *Dubliners* 59–60). Some analysts interpret the 'reparation' in the traditional Irish Catholic context.(3) Such a reading is compatible with the sequence in which the proprietress converses with Mr Doran in an empty parlour in her boarding house. What exactly happens in the isolated room is never made clear, but there is an allusion to Mr Doran's acceptance of marriage as ethical reparation in the end. As a participant in the confessor/confessant relationship, Mr Doran is aware of the early symptoms of his own moral deterioration. In terms of spiritual repentance and religious and ethical reparation for Mr Doran, as well as for the proprietress, the sequel to the event is described decisively and ironically in *Ulysses*. In the 12th episode of Ulysses, 'Cyclops', Mrs Mooney, the proprietress, is the owner of 'a kip' (Joyce *Ulysses* 391) and is depicted as 'the old prostitute of a mother procuring rooms to street couples' (Joyce *Ulysses* 407). In his turn, Mr Doran, a 'lowest blackguard', is infamous for 'his periodical bends' (Joyce *Ulysses* 89) and is described as having screamed blasphemous abuse: '[w]ho said Christ is good?' (Joyce *Ulysses* 390). *Ulysses*, thus, contains an intertextual reference to the confessor/confessant confrontation between Mrs Mooney and Mr Doran in 'The Boarding House', with the implication that this encounter had produced no psychological or dialectic transformation. Joyce pursues the theme further by creating a contrast between malfunction in the confessor/confessant relationship in isolated areas and candid communication in public spaces. But, as we will see later, this did not occur until the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses*. By then Joyce must have been deeply influenced by Synge's plays in terms of how an internal change of characters could be effectively depicted.

## 4. Psychological vacillation and transfiguration in public zones

All of the significant characters in 'The Sisters', 'An Encounter', 'A Painful Case' and 'The Boarding House' in Joyce's *Dubliners* confront the most shameful element of their minds in a secluded space, and each experiences a failed psychological transformation, which can be regarded as a negative version of the Irish Catholic tradition of confession. By clear contrast, the antagonist in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* faces his darkest side in a public space, surrounded by ill-disposed villagers and achieves a radical transformation.

In the beginning of Act I of *The Playboy of the Western World*, the antagonist, Christy Mahon, appears as a 'slight young man [⋯] frightened and dirty' (Synge, *Plays* 67). In Act III,

however, he squarely fights three men. The Christy in Act I and Act III seem to be different men with different levels of physical strength. A scrawny and timid young man is transfigured into a vigorous independent man. This process of the transformation is deeply based upon a vacillation experienced by the antagonist between shameful reality and fanciful unreality.

The self-proclaimed patricide is inflated by a sudden surge of popularity and pride after he visits a remote village. The self-inflation reflects his long-standing inferiority complex, which is rooted in the cruel oppression he suffered at the hands of his despotic father. His innermost shame is revealed to the audience through his vain conceit. After this unexpected popularity, however, his pride is completely shattered at the sight of his father (Old Mahon), who survives the fight with his son and eagerly seeks revenge. When Christy momentarily escapes his difficulties with a help of a shrewd widow, he regains his pompous ego and heroically wins 'all in the sports [⋯], racing, lepping, dancing' (Synge, *Plays* 133). These events can be summarized as a process of vacillation between reality (his shame and inferiority complex) and unreality (his inflated ego and fancy). Christy's self-image swings between that of an oppressed young man living under his father's arbitrary rule, tersely captured in the 'devil's own mirror' in his native home (Synge, *Plays* 95) and a brave father-slayer, recapitulated in the mirror in the village he visits. Nevertheless, his inflated ego and repeated experience of abject humiliation ultimately lead to his liberation from both. In his final transformation at the very end of the play, he becomes an independent man.

Even after Joyce completed *Dubliners* in 1907, he continued to explore the themes of confession in a secluded place and failure in transfiguration. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was first published serially in *The Egoist* from 1914 to 1915, the antagonist, Stephen Dedalus, enters a confession booth and confesses to a Capuchin priest that he has 'committed sins of impurity' (Joyce *Portrait* 156). When he emerges from the booth, he has an intense feeling that '[h]is soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy' (Joyce *Portrait* 157). His sense of serenity is strengthened in the last section of the novel, which appears as extracts from the antagonist's diary. This diary is nothing more than a textual recounting of a confession in a secluded space, forming an early prototype of an inner monologue in *Ulysses*. It is therefore not surprising that the secret effusion of his ego-inflated desire and indelible shame produces neither freedom nor psychological transfiguration. Ironically, in the beginning of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is described as a depressed and hopeless young man.

The same vacillation between shameful reality and fanciful unreality that appears in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* can be found, as I have argued in another paper (4),

in the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses*, which has a style of a script for a play. Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged advertising agent, is concerned about the troubled young man, Stephen Dedalus and follows him to a night-town. Upon entering the red-light district, he actually steps into a protean world of a dream play. Bloom encounters his dead father, who remonstrates with Bloom about his debauchery, in which Bloom does not actually engage, but which he desires and for which his conscience troubles himself. In this way, his innermost shame is revealed. He also encounters a Turkish version of his wife, who urges him to call her 'Mrs Marion' (Joyce, *Ulysses* 570), in the same way that the adulterer Boylan addresses her in a letter in the fourth episode, 'Calypso' (Joyce, *Ulysses* 74). After this, Gerty MacDowell—transformed from a pristine girl in the 13th episode 'Nausicaa' into a blatant woman—accuses Bloom of voyeurism and masturbation, which Bloom has committed and of which he is secretly ashamed. After pulling himself together and following Stephen momentarily in a realistic sequence, he is dragged into an imaginary court of law, where he is at the mercy of abject humiliation and exaggerated praise by a crowd from his local community. Similarly, in the imaginary sequences, Stephen Dedalus encounters his dead mother. On her deathbed, she impels him to repent his cold-heartedness, thereby driving him to hysterics. In a brief realistic sequence, Stephen is struck in the face by a soldier, an agent for British imperialism, and Bloom helps him to escape from the night-town. In the vacillation between reality and unreality in 'Circe', Bloom and Stephen are thus forced into direct confrontation with the unresolved problems that they had faced in the previous episodes. Stephen encounters his discord with his father, his sense of guilt for his dead mother and his mental entanglements in religious and colonial issues. Bloom encounters his dampened relationship with his wife after the early death of his son, the trauma caused by his father's suicide and his isolation from the local community.

Both Stephen and Bloom reciprocally undergo profound humiliation and recuperation, and they ultimately achieve spiritual peace to the extent that they find emotional stability and self-esteem. By the end of the episode, the astonishingly close affinity between Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and 'Circe' in Joyce's *Ulysses*, in terms of antagonist's transformation is so obvious that it cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. The most likely explanation for the affinity between two works is that Joyce's deep interest and keen observation of the course of riots against Synge's play at the Abbey Theatre and the play's extreme impact on the public led him to become deeply fascinated with the process of the antagonist's transfiguration that was immanent in the play. After repeatedly employing the themes of revelation of innermost shame in a secluded zone and failure in psychological transformation, he finds a rudiment of an

innovative breakthrough in the treatment of the themes.

## Conclusion

James Joyce repeatedly employs the themes of confession and subsequent failure in transformation in his earlier works, including 'The Sisters', 'An Encounter', 'A Painful Case' and 'The Boarding House'. In *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, Joyce describes how Stephen Dedalus experiences spiritual purification after visiting a confession booth. In this work, the author seems to have developed the themes beyond the concept of an unfulfilled attempt to achieve transformation through confession to reach a successful transformation. At the beginning of *Ulysses*, however, Joyce depicts a deeply pervasive mood of depression. Joyce did not find the aesthetic resources that he would use in the future, however, until Synge elaborated the theme of transformation in *The Playboy of the Western World*, in which an antagonist reveals his innermost shame and inferiority complex, experiences psychological vacillation and achieves transfiguration.

The history of literature and drama in modern Ireland contains other works whose themes and aesthetic structure are similar to those of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* describes how an antagonist, obsessed with the idea of singing like Gigli, achieves his transformation after revealing his secret complex and experiencing psychological vacillation. In the end, he does not merely sing like Gigli; he sings in the very voice of Gigli. In Yeats' *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, an antagonist—a spirit medium—is humiliated by her guest, but she later performs astonishing spiritualism and conjures up the spirit of Jonathan Swift through her body. In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats and Lady Gregory describe how an old woman, after revealing her innermost desire and receiving cold treatment from villagers, ultimately achieves transformation from an exhausted old hag into a queen-like figure.

As used by Synge and Joyce, the themes of confession, vacillation and transformation should be placed within this broad context. The depth of analysis required for such a study of these themes would exceed the scope of this article. They deserve to be treated in large-scale studies.

### Notes

（1） James Joyce knew Daniel T. Sheehan in University College Dublin. Sheehan welcomed the antagonist in *The Playboy of the Western World* as a sort of artistic liberator, underlining that when an artist appears in

Ireland, who "was not afraid of life and his nature", then "the woman of Ireland would receive him." (Joyce, *Letters II* 211)

（2） Futoshi Sakauchi. "Confession Box and Theatre in James Joyce's Early Writings" International Institute for Education and Research in Theatre and Film Arts, Global COE Programme, Theatre and Film Studies, Waseda University vol.5 (2010): 61-70.

（3） Terence Brown points out "[i]n the rite of confession the penitent is invited to perform acts in reparation of sin" (Joyce, *Dubliners* 268). Don Gifford quotes especially from the *Maynooth Catechism* and points out "[d]uring confession the confessor enjoins "penance" on "penitents, in satisfaction for their sins [...]. Satisfaction is reparation of the injury and insult offered to God by sin, and of the injustice done to our neighbor" (Gifford 65).

（4） Futoshi Sakauchi. "Body and Theatre in 'Circe' of James Joyce's *Ulysses*." International Institute for Education and Research in Theatre and Film Arts, Global COE Programme, Theatre and Film Studies, Waseda University vol.3 (2009): 251-261.

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